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ABSTRACT

Truancy is a growing problem for both individual pupils and school systems in general. Traditionally, truancy has been thought of as a "symptom" of other problems faced by the student. The advent of behavior modification offers a new way of viewing truancy as a discrete behavior capable of modification by the application of scientifically-derived principles of learning. Contingency contracting, a specific behavior modification technique, may be one method for reducing truancy among school children. This article describes a program for contingency contracting which was successful in one high school. (Author)

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CONTINGENCY MANAGEMENT AS A MEANS OF REDUCING SCHOOL TRUANCY

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The medical model as a frame of reference for conceptualizing maladaptive behavior is especially prevalent in the literature dealing with school truancy. This point of view is emphasized by D'Evelyn (1957) who states that ". . . truancy is a symptom demanding immediate attention from responsible adults." The practitioners who work to reduce truant behavior and follow the symptom or medical model are warned of the ". . . symptoms of deeper maladjustment . . . (Tennent, 1971) which are manifestations of "ineffective parenting, disintegrating family units . . . and . . . a lack of community" (Campbell, 1972).

The purpose of this study was to shift the emphasis from the medical model to a psychological model as discussed by Krasner and Ullman (1965). This shift rejects the symptom concept and concentrates on the particular behavior being modified and its immediate consequences. Therefore, for purposes of this investigation, truancy was considered a discrete behavior alterable by manipulation of its consequences.

Two behavior modification techniques were employed during this investigation. First, a modified token economy was used, and secondly, a collective (group) contingency contract was drawn up for the experimental group of truants.

Method

Subjects

Sixty high school students, grades 9-12, who had nine or more days of verified truancy during the first eight weeks of school, were identified. All the students were assigned random numbers and randomly placed in one of three groups, control, experimental and those not included in the study. All groups consisted of twenty students.

Baseline

Baseline consisted of an eight-week period with thirty-seven required days of attendance. Data were accumulated during baseline without the knowledge of the experimental or control group. Regular school attendance procedures were continued throughout this period in an effort to reduce truancy. These procedures included parent contacts, home calls, suspension from school, contacts with probation officers and filing of truancy petitions with the district attorney.

Data were recorded as to the frequency of days truant for each subject. A cumulative record of days truant for each subject and each of the groups was also maintained.

Intervention

Intervention consisted of a like period as that of the baseline period. During intervention there were three school holidays within the eight-week period, resulting in thirty-seven required days of attendance.

During intervention the control group continued to receive the traditional treatment for truancy. The following procedures were used with the experimental group:

1. During the week prior to intervention a group meeting was held with the experimental group. Each subject was paid fifty cents (50¢) for attending the meeting. Attendance was 100%. The meeting consisted of a discussion of some basic principles of behavior modification, an explanation

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of the experimental design and a review of the contingency contract. No "commercials" were offered as to the importance of good attendance, the need for a degree or the beauty of having a high school education.

2. Each subject was scheduled for a ten-minute conference during which the contract was discussed and signed.

The intervention program was implemented.

3. Data as to the number of days truant per week and cumulative days absent for the intervention period were maintained for the experimental and control groups.

Contract

Each subject in the experimental group signed the following contract:

Name _____ Date _____

Problem: During the first eight weeks of school I have had _____ days of truancy. I agree that this is excessive and will follow the procedures below in order that I might reduce the number of days truant.

Provisions: I, _____, agree to the following:

1. I will attend school every day. If I miss school it will be for an excused illness or doctor's appointment and I agree to bring a note from home.

2. At the end of each school day I will record my attendance on a chart in the counselor's office.

3. Each morning I will pick up a green attendance card in the counselor's office, complete the card, have it initialed by each teacher for each class I attend, and exchange the card with my counselor according to the provisions of the reward schedule posted in the counselor's office.

4. I agree to attend all scheduled group meetings. I understand that this is a binding contract and I agree to abide by all the provisions herein.

_____

Student's signature

Counselor's Statement and Agreement:

I understand that this is a binding contract between _____ and myself and I agree to the provisions herein.

_____

Counselor's signature

Reward Schedule

The following reward schedule was given to each subject at the time of contract signing and was also posted in the counselor's office.

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REWARD SCHEDULE

PROVISIONS

In order to help you develop habits of attendance you will be rewarded for the classes you attend. Gradually, the rewards that you earn will be withdrawn in the hope that other rewards (success in class, less nagging by parents, freedom from that feeling of "getting caught" for skipping) will take over. During this eight week project you will be rewarded in the followin[illegible]ner for attending classes.

WEEKS 1, 2, AND 3

1. For each signature you receive on the green card you will be given a ticket for the drawing at the end of the three weeks.

2. For each positive (good) comment written by a teacher on the green card you will be given a bonus ticket.

3. For every five full days of class you attend without missing any classes you will receive five bonus tickets the first five days, ten bonus tickets for the second five (10 in a row), and fifteen for the third five (15 in a row). If you attend fifteen days without missing a class you will have earned thirty bonus tickets.

4. A drawing will be held at the end of the first three weeks. If you attended all your classes for three weeks you would have been given at least 120 chances. So you can see the more you attend the better chance of winning the prizes listed below:

First Prize	$10.00
Second Prize	5.00
Third Prize	3.00
Fourth through Tenth	1.00 each

WEEKS 4, 5, 6 AND 7

The same procedure as weeks 1, 2, and 3 will be followed. The prizes are listed below:

First Prize	4 tickets to drive-in movie
Second Prize	2 tickets to Cinema Theatre
Third Prize	2 albums (33 1/3)
Fourth Prize	1 album (33 1/3)
Fifth through tenth	$2.00 gift certificates

WEEK 8

During the last week no prizes will be awarded. We will have two group meetings during which we will discuss attendance and related topics. You must continue, however, to turn in your green card daily.

Intervention Procedures

As called for in the contract and reward schedule, subjects carried a 3 x 5 green card with them to all classes. Each signature from a teacher was exchangeable for one ticket for the drawing. Each written positive comment by a teacher was worth bonus tickets. Subjects were required to turn in the card at the end of the day and record their attendance on a cumulative record in the office.

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Six thirty-minute meetings were held with the experimental group. They consisted of the initial introductory meeting, two meetings during which the prizes were drawn, one meeting during the second week which was designed to check programs and insure that the project was off to a smooth start, and the final two meetings during the last week of intervention during which the subjects were encouraged to discuss their attitudes toward school, future plans for the remainder of the school year, and their feelings about the experiment.

At no time during the intervention were subjects called to the counseling office or attendance office for discussion of matters related to truancy. All nonattendance was ignored by the counselor.

Results

Individual Data

Table 1 is a breakdown of the mean days truant per week and the cumulative days truant for baseline and intervention for the experimental group. Table 2 contains the same data for the control group. The data for the experimental group indicate a reduction in the number of days truant in nineteen of the twenty cases. Of the twenty subjects in the control group, only four had a reduction in days truant.

Group Data

A standard Z-test for significance of difference between the experimental and control group means was applied. The results of the Z-test are shown in Table 3. The results demonstrate significance well beyond that hoped for by the experimenter. There appears to be little doubt, based on these data, that the treatment did reduce truancy.

Discussion

On the basis of these results, it would seem likely that approaching truancy as a discrete behavior, not a symptom or something else, has merit. The fact that the rate of truancy was decreased by controlling environmental contingencies points up the fact that school officials could save time and effort by dealing with the individual truant behavior and not attempting to alter environmental contingencies that may be beyond the control of the school, such as home problems and societal conditions.

An important variable that should be considered in evaluation of this study is the effect that teacher response had on the subjects' rate of attendance. The fact that subjects were given bonus tickets for written positive comments by teachers may have had more of an effect than the experimental design took into account. The subjects were encouraged to elicit positive comments from the teachers. The writing of positive comments by the teachers may have set conditions whereby the teacher began to have a positive swing in his attitude toward the student. This, then, may have set up a behavioral chain reaction that was mutually rewarding to both the student and the teacher, resulting in an increase in attending behavior on the part of the student.

Generally, the subjects appeared to like the use of the contract and reward schedule. They often expressed the fact that they knew what was

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expected and what would happen if they followed through. The contract and reward schedule also provided an opportunity to reward a positive behavior instead of punishing a negative one.

One procedural point that should be considered is the use of the types of rewards that were employed. The project cost approximately $35.00 and resulted in several thousand dollars being saved by the school district as a result of increased attendance. The cry of "bribery" may be heard when using this form of rewarding of behavior. The answer to that cry is in the results. The rewards used appeared to be highly effective for this age group.

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Table 1

Mean Days Absent and Cumulative Days Absent
(Baseline and Intervention)
for the Experimental Group

	Number of Days Absent per School Week		Cumulative Number of Days Absent	
Subject	Baseline	Intervention	Baseline	Intervention
X_a	4.6	3.1	37	25
X_b	4.6	.8	37	7
X_c	2.3	1.0	19	8
X_d	3.0	1.2	24	10
X_e	3.3	1.6	27	13
X_f	1.2	0.0	22	0
X_g	2.7	0.0	22	0
X_h	4.2	.3	34	3
X_i	1.5	.1	12	1
X_j	4.3	0.0	35	0
X_k	2.2	0.0	18	0
X_l	1.5	.3	12	3
X_m	3.6	4.5	29	36
X_n	1.2	0.0	10	0
X_o	4.1	2.1	33	17
X_p	2.2	1.0	18	8
X_q	2.3	.1	19	1
X_r	3.0	.1	24	1
X_s	1.5	.8	12	7
X_t	1.8	.2	15	2

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Table 2

Mean Days Absent and Cumulative Days Absent
(Baseline and Intervention)
for the Control Group

	Number of Days Absent per School Week		Cumulative Number of Days Absent	
Subject	Baseline	Intervention	Baseline	Intervention
C_a	2.6	2.2	21	18
C_b	2.8	3.4	23	27
C_c	2.6	3.0	21	24
C_d	2.2	4.3	18	35
C_e	2.5	3.0	20	24
C_f	2.8	3.3	23	26
C_g	4.6	4.5	37	36
C_h	3.0	4.3	24	35
C_i	1.4	4.5	11	36
C_j	1.6	2.3	13	19
C_k	2.2	4.2	18	34
C_l	2.6	3.8	21	30
C_m	1.8	2.1	14	17
C_n	4.3	4.5	35	36
C_o	1.8	3.9	14	31
C_p	1.6	2.5	13	20
C_q	4.6	4.5	37	36
C_r	1.0	4.0	9	32
C_s	4.5	4.1	36	33
C_t	4.0	4.5	32	36

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Table 3

Mean Days Truant During Baseline and Intervention
For Experimental and Control Groups and
Significance of Differences
Between Means

Group	N	Baseline Mean Days Truant	Intervention Mean Days Truant	Standard Deviation	Significance of Difference
Experi-mental	20	22.3	7.1	7.5	Z = 12.5
Control	20	21.9	29.3	6.8	(p = .0001)